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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
NATIONAL FOREIGN ASSESSMENT CENTER

21 December 1978

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

OPPOSITION DEMONSTRATIONS IN IRAN:
LEADERSHIP, ORGANIZATION, AND TACTICS [REDACTED]

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The protest marches in Tehran on 10 and 11 December 1978, which brought as many as a million demonstrators into the streets, were masterfully organized and controlled. The evidence suggests that local community leaders called dastehgardan, whose traditional functions include organizing religious processions, mobilized small crowds around local mosques and then moved these groups to join with others from around the city to form the massive parade of demonstrators. [REDACTED]

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The ability of these local community leaders to bring out large numbers of people in response to directives from members of the Islamic clergy gives the religious opposition in Iran an organizational strength which distinguishes it from any other group within the opposition. National Front politicians have benefited politically through cooperation with the leaders of the religious opposition, but the National Front has neither an independent mass following nor any significant ability to mobilize and orchestrate large demonstrations. [REDACTED]

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This memorandum was prepared by the Iran Analytical Center of the Office of Regional and Political Analysis. Questions and comments may be addressed to [REDACTED]

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The Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini has served as the focal point for the loyalty of the religious opposition, and has provided guidance and support for the movement acting in his name in Iran. Responsive to Khomeini's leadership, though sometimes acting independently, clerical leaders, shopkeepers and merchants in the bazaar, labor leaders, students, and others have mounted a massive campaign against the Shah's regime. [REDACTED]

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There is no evidence to substantiate the claim voiced periodically by moderate opposition leaders and members of the government that behind the pattern of events lies the guiding hand of "foreign elements," "leftists," or, more specifically, the Tudeh Party. [REDACTED]

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Leadership and Organization at the Grassroots

The massive demonstrations in Tehran on the high holy days of Moharram, when as many as a million protesters marched peacefully through the capital, were the most impressive display of organizational ability thus far seen in the recent incidents of civil unrest in Iran. Detailed information on the organization and leadership of the protest is not available, but there are several indications that local community leaders, called dastehgardan, mobilized and controlled the massive crowd, which was in fact an amalgamation of small Shia grassroots organizations called dastehs or howzes. [REDACTED]

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Several notable features of the marches on Tasu'a and Ashura suggest that the dastehgardan, responding to general instructions from the ayatollahs, provided the tactical leadership. The protesters assembled in small groups at mosques throughout the city before proceeding toward the main line of march. As the tributary groups moved toward assembly points, they stopped and started and chanted and sang in response to specific instructions by leaders carrying megaphones or riding in mini-buses equipped with loudspeakers.

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Attempts by isolated individuals and groups to stir up trouble were rebuffed by the marchers themselves. Marshals showed concern for such matters as providing food and drink, taking care of lost children, providing change for telephone calls, and operating a lost-and-found service. [REDACTED]

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The ayatollahs and political leaders did not join the demonstration until it was on the main route of march. The effective organization and control of the component units of the largers crowd from the outset, the attention to detail in the activities of the marshals, and the resistance to apparent outsiders seeking to stir up trouble, all suggest organization based on local, community structure. The dastehs would appear to provide the most logical existing organization that would serve this function. [REDACTED]

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Leadership: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Formally Shia Islam has no clergy. However, scholars of religion, interpreters of the law, and venerable men chosen on an ad hoc basis from within the community of the faithful assume the status of religious leadership. Foremost among Iranian Shiites, and titular head of the religious opposition to the Shah, is the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Khomeini commands a broad following among the lower classes in urban centers, shopkeepers and merchants in the bazaars, workers, and students. [REDACTED]

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His popular influence heightened by 15 years in exile, Ayatollah Khomeini has emerged as the focal point for the loyalty of religious dissidents in Iran. His picture is prominently displayed during marches and demonstrations and his name is chanted by the masses of his followers. [REDACTED]

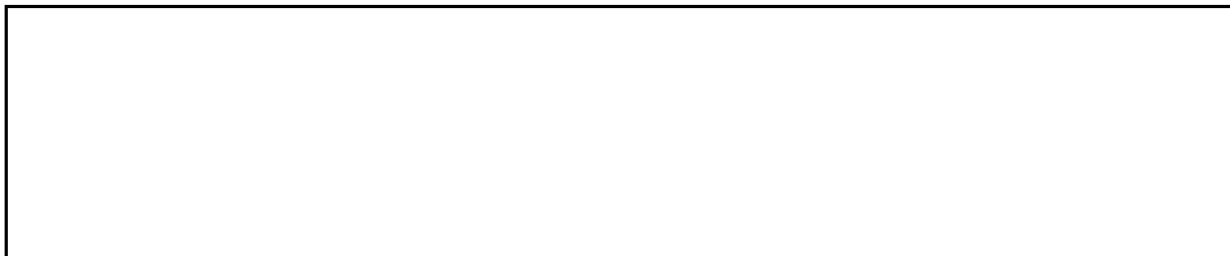
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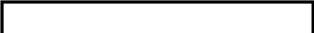
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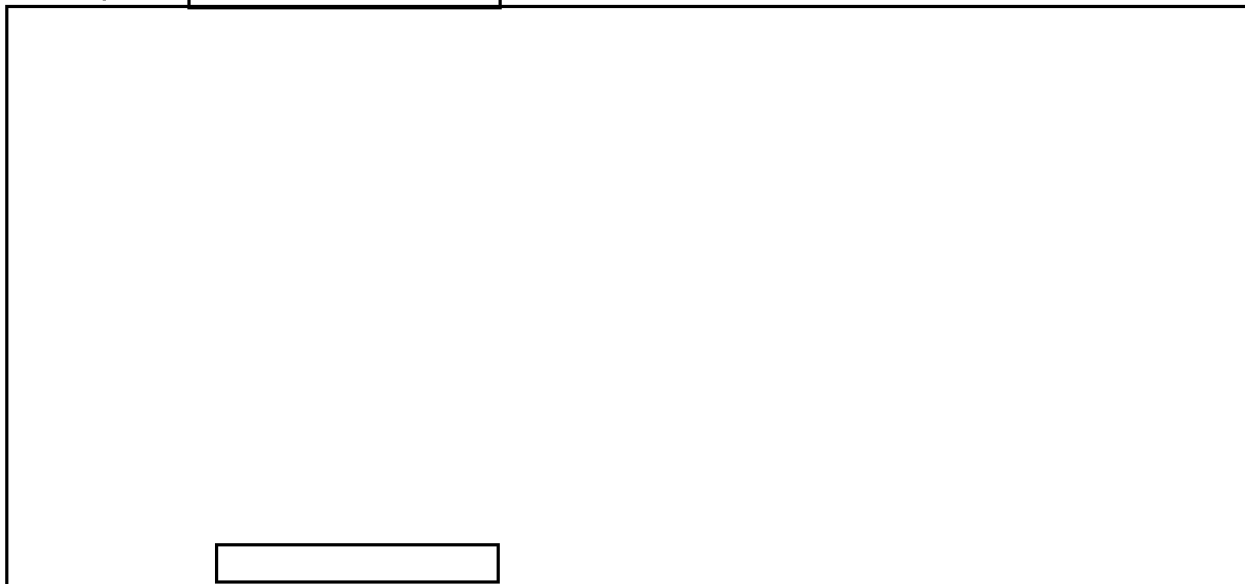


Leadership: The Islamic Clergy

Second to Ayatollah Khomeini in terms of popular following are a number of other ayatollahs in religious centers around Iran: Shariat-Madari in Qom, Talaghani in Tehran, Qomi in Mashad, and others. Lesser clerical leaders in each of the mosques provide a degree of local leadership and a channel of communication between the upper echelons and the people. 

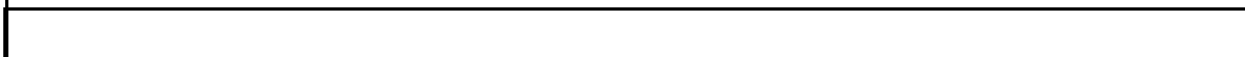
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Leadership: The National Front

Leaders of the National Front appear to have played a role in clearing the way for the peaceful demonstrations in Tehran on 10-11 December, and they have certainly benefited politically from those demonstrations. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that the National Front or any other political structure has any significant organizational capability at the grassroots level. The lack of a well-organized political following and the fear of being swept aside in another round of widespread violence may in fact have deterred National Front leaders from promoting unrest during Moharram.

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National Front leaders have interests in common with the religious opposition, but the relationship between the two groups appears to be one of only limited cooperation. The National Front seeks to benefit from the organizational capability of the religious opposition. But the religious opposition does not appear to be susceptible to specific direction by the National Front or any other political leaders.

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Tactics: Students

Iranian students have not played a leading role in organizing major opposition demonstrations during the past year of unrest in Iran. However, in the months preceding Moharram, in particular during the first week of October 1978 (the week of university registration and the opening of classes) and during the first days of November, university and secondary school students instigated and led widespread incidents of violence. In the first week of December 1978, the opening of the month of Moharram, groups of young people--many of them

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presumably students--engaged in sporadic, hit-and-run confrontations with military units in Tehran and other cities. []

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University campuses in Iran have long been centers of political dissidence and the scene of opposition demonstrations which have often turned into bloody confrontations between students and security forces. Additionally, the universities have provided a recruiting ground for the two Iranian terrorist groups, the Mujahedin and the Chariks. Some Iranian students abroad, members of the Iranian Students Association in the United States and the Confederation of Iranian Students in Europe, have returned to Iran during the current period of unrest and have presumably participated in anti-regime activities. []

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Tactics: Ad Hoc Groups and Random Violence

The events of 4-5 November 1978, when mobs of demonstrators roamed the streets of Tehran setting fires and destroying property, served to reveal the extent of frustration and hostility toward the Shah's regime on the part of the general public. These incidents appeared to be largely unplanned and spontaneous. The choice of targets by the protestors, however, took its cue from the movement against westernization and modernization in Iran widely articulated in pamphlets emanating from a number of sources within the religious opposition. []

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A similar quality of random violence characterizes the incidents of harassment and attacks on the American community. Threatening letters and telephone messages, attempts to set fire to vehicles belonging to Americans, rock throwing, bombings, and firebombings were reported in a number of cities around Iran. Most of this activity took place in Isfahan and Tehran where there are large concentrations of Americans. The anti-American incidents do not appear to be the work of any single group mounting an organized campaign. In the few cases of bombings, for example, the explosives were crudely constructed devices made up from materials easily obtained in the local bazaars, which distinguishes them from the devices employed by organized terrorist groups in Iran. []

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Tactics: Terrorists

During the months preceding Moharram, there was a sharp increase in the number of terrorist incidents, involving domestic as well as foreign targets. The Sazman-e Charikha-ye Feda'i-ye Khalq (Peoples Sacrifice Guerrillas, or Chariks), a terrorist group active since 1971 and far to the left of the main lines of the religious opposition, attacked police and security officials in Tehran and Tabriz during September, in Isfahan and Mashad in October, and again in Tehran in early December. Other incidents, primarily those directed against Americans, appear to have been the work of ad hoc groups of Islamic dissidents.

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Tactics: The Question of Imported Technology

Techniques and equipment being used by political and religious opposition groups in Iran afford little evidence of foreign involvement. Copying machines for pamphlets, walkie-talkies, bullhorns, and other loudspeakers, are in common use in Iranian cities or are readily available.

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The use of forged "documents" or of tape recordings of the sounds of violent confrontations to add to the air of crisis and confusion during the night do not necessarily imply foreign guidance. An ostensible bank document purporting to list prominent Iranians sending large sums of money out of the country merely builds on the general

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suspicion of corruption in high places. The use of tape recordings is borrowed from the muzzeins who for some years have been using the device to avoid the climb up the minaret to make the call to prayers. [REDACTED]

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